

This tool is to support medical providers in initiating difficult conversations in ways that empower families to make informed choices. Surveys show that knowing about serious risk can improve patient compliance. Think about using the **SPIKES** Strategy.

## THE **SPIKES** STRATEGY

### **SETTING**

Find a private location and minimize distractions. If possible, have pager on silent or pages forwarded. Sit down. Look attentive and calm. Invite family to have family member or friend present when giving news; if a lot of people are present, identify who is family spokesperson. Ensure professional interpreter (not family member) is present if you do not share primary language with the patient/family.

### **PERCEPTION**

Determine the patient's/family's understanding of the medical situation.

- “What have you been told about this so far?”
- “Are you worried this may be something serious?”

### **INVITATION**

Determine how much the family wants to know.

- “Are you the kind of person who prefers to know all the details about what is going on?”
- “How much information would you like me to give you about your child's diagnosis and treatment?”

### **KNOWLEDGE**

Before you share difficult information, give the family a warning that difficult news is coming so that they may prepare psychologically. “Unfortunately, I have some difficult news for you, Mr. and Mrs. Smith.” “John, I am so sorry to have to tell you...” Try to use the same language your patient uses and avoid technical language. Give the information in small chunks, and pause frequently and ask the patient/parent if the information you are providing is making sense. If it does not make sense, repeat and clarify before moving onto the next piece of information.



## EMPATHY

Acknowledge patients'/family's emotions as they arise and address them. "The Empathetic Response" method:

- 1 Listen for and identify the emotion or mix of emotions. If unsure of the emotion, ask "How does that make you feel?" or "What do you make of what I've just told you?"
- 2 Identify the cause or source of the emotion (most often this is the bad news).
- 3 Show your patient that you have made the connection between the above two steps—i.e. you have identified the emotion and its origin. "Hearing the result of this test is clearly a major shock to you." "Obviously this news is very upsetting." "Clearly this is very distressing." "That's not what you wanted to hear, I know." Validate the patient's emotions: "I can understand how you can feel that way."

## STRATEGY AND SUMMARY

Summarize the information in your discussion and give your patient/family the opportunity to voice any major concerns or questions. You and your patient/patient's family should leave the discussion with a clear plan of the next steps and the roles you all will play in taking those steps.

Buckman, Robert. Breaking bad news: The S-P-I-K-E-S strategy. Community Oncology March/April 2005; 138-142.

### We hope this tool supports you in many difficult conversations that can cause fear, such as:

- Diagnosing a life-threatening or life-limiting condition
- Explaining the serious risks associated with epilepsy and seizures; including Sudden Unexpected Death in Epilepsy or SUDEP
- Discussing a high-risk procedure or treatment plan

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